



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

## Getting Our House In Order

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 7, 2014  
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 18:15-20*

For us here in the Northeast a very pleasant summer is coming to an end. The past few days notwithstanding, we have had the surprise of very few unbearably hot and humid days; and even those of us who simply prefer cooler weather regret to see the waning days of the season. Few of us, however, fail to hope that the coming of fall might magically halt the onslaught of one truly horrible event after another. I won't list them for you; our sensibilities in hearing them have been stretched full out already. This week as September began, various media outlets published lists, reminiscent of the omnipresent kind we get at year-end: the top ten worst things to happen during the summer of 2014. It must have been difficult to choose, as so many horrific and quite frightening contenders come to mind.

Last Sunday a phrase in our opening prayer gave voice to a plea from our lips to God's ears that I have been unable to get out of my mind and heart this week. Among a list of petitions we prayed that God would "increase in us **true** religion." In a moment of humility and ambiguity not always exhibited in our praying, we, or the writers of the Prayer Book, resisted the temptation to embellish the phrase, spelling out for God what **we** mean by true religion, opting instead to leave it open, sparse—giving sway to the desire of our hearts over the conviction of our brand. **True** religion—holy God, how desperately we need it.

Religion is not all that is wrong with the world, though frankly it is not difficult for me to understand how many might—and indeed do—conclude that religion is fundamentally flawed and so divisive that we would be better without it. Many who understand the zeitgeist of this era's global conflict much more deeply than I argue convincingly that religion is not at the root of every battle that bears its name. I concede that point; and, yet, I am persuaded that our hope for peace depends upon the willingness of religious people in the world to clean up our religious practice—the parts we have thought about and particularly the parts that are so unconscious to us that we literally never consider them. Before anyone else does, let me be the first to say that we have control, or the illusion of it, over only our idea of religion—ours being a quite small slice of Christianity, and even it far from one mind. Still, in my deepest heart I am conscious of a persistent sense that we are being called to integrity and truth in our own practice, a process much more easily imagined than rendered.

Any stab at understanding true religion is inevitably fraught with limited perspective, the hard-wired ethno- and religious-centrism of which we are hardly aware and never so without the discipline of rigid inquiry and introspection. In our tradition, we are proudly bound to scripture, a sacred tome that we both know and don't know but which we treasure. It is unlikely that many of us gathered here today are among the "the scripture says it; I believe it; that settles it" crowd; and, yet, in our practice, particularly as it is viewed from those in other religions who might listen in on a Sunday morning, we probably appear to be without much circumspection in the hearing of our readings each week.

Today's gospel taken from the narrative of Matthew exhorts us in the church to reprove one another as necessary, laying out a fairly specific regimen for dealing with "sin" within the church. Despite my better self, I allowed myself a bit of fantasy in contemplating how that might work; perhaps it will not surprise you to hear that **my** view of the sin and the sinner was the standard used in my imagining—and that the "big" sin usually involved some version of not agreeing with me! Trust me: it wouldn't work so well—even if I got myself out of the mix.

So should we read these words at all in our common worship? Is there homiletic worth in the verses? Yes, I think there is. The notion of truthfulness with one another, always with the caveat of humility and kindness, is

important for life in any kind of community. Standing up for, owning what we believe to be true and good about the world and God and ourselves, is indeed important. But to actualize the process of doing so in a faith community is a slippery slope at best and almost undoubtedly did not work much better in the first century at the time Matthew was writing than it would now. In fact, the passage itself gives testimony to its downfall. Listen to these words: As the process continues to be unfolded, Matthew has Jesus say, “And if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Do you see how easily an uninformed reading of this passage, or one like it, could lead to the radicalization of a person? How far is it from this message writ large to a radicalized understanding of religion that justifies one Christian or one Muslim or one Hindu to say to another: “If you do not understand the word of God as we do, you are to us as an infidel, one so beyond the scope of our group that we deny the legitimacy of your life”? It is possible that you are thinking that I am being overwrought. I may be, but I ask for your indulgence for a moment. In the milieu of the first century when these words were written, Gentiles and tax collectors were truly an anathema to the Jewish Christians in the community of Matthew. The Gentiles had been understood as such for generations in the Judaic upbringing of these new Christians, and the tax collectors were uniformly despised because of the profit they derived from their complicity with the hated Romans.

If we think consciously and specifically about such passages at all (and how many of us really do?), many conclude that this passage—and particularly the comment about the Gentiles and the tax collectors—is reflective more of Matthew than of Jesus. It is fairly easy to make that leap in this case since in other well-known instances Jesus makes quite inclusive remarks about Gentiles, tax collectors and others beyond the pale. I am clearly in that camp, and I base not only my own faith but also my teaching and preaching on that kind of perspective. The bigger truth, though, is that we as Christians cannot be sure exactly what Jesus said and did not say any more than Jews can claim with utter certainty Moses’ words from the mountain or Muslims the teaching of Mohammed. We can and should believe what we hold true; but when it comes to proclaiming absolutes about the nature, the purpose, the plan of God, we—all of us religious people in the world—need to be minimalists, religious minimalists.

The detractors of the Episcopal Church will love that admonishment, claiming as they often do that we don’t believe much of anything anyway. Be that as it may, I stand by the claim: True religion is minimalist religion, not meaningless religion, but religion that understands the truth that only God has the last word. I have quoted Alfred North Whitehead to you too many times, but here it goes again: “In religion as in science, the merest hint of finality is the admission of folly”—translated, if we think we know the answer, we are probably in a heap of trouble.

Living that in an expression of organized religion like ours is not easy. Our liturgy is expansive, about as far from minimalist as one can get: Lord knows we love dressing up and processing! And, yet, with all my heart I believe that being truthful to ourselves (**and others**) about what we mean when, for example, we say “**this** is the word of God” or “**this** is the gospel of the Lord,” about how we regard the ancient creed we recite each week, about our own uncertainties about God, let alone religion, about our fears that we have none of it figured out—that being truthful in these ways—is the surest hope we have for ever knowing true religion.

Will that bring true religion to all the world? No, not so far as I can tell; but what it will do is open our hearts and minds to a reality of God that frees us from worrying about the eternal rightness of belief and particular practice, allowing our religion to liberate us finally to love. It won’t take care of radicalism in the world; it won’t make us all instantly and infinitely safer. But it will get our house in order and in the process allow us to be part of a force for good and truth that just might be the hope of the world.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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